TESTIMONY OF ANDREW COCUP

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Why?

"Upon this handful of soil our survival depends. Husband it and it will grow our food, our fuel, and our shelter and surround us with beauty. Abuse it and the soil will collapse and die taking humanity with it." Vedas Sanskrit Scripture 1500 BC.

La Ferme À Naroques came from a conviction that there is a desperate need to provide working alternative models to industrial agriculture. Aside from the chemical poison and pollution, in purely physical terms our current food system involves the loss of thirty football pitches of topsoil every minute.

Everything begins and ends with the soil, and of the 3 things that create all life, sun, rain and soil, it is the only one we can influence. Fertility is fundamental to the health and nutrition of our crops and the people that eat them. Plants grown in healthy soil don't need our poisonous sprays to keep them alive. If they did, they wouldn't exist. Thus the agro-chemical industry spends billions lobbying to obscure the simple fact that in a world of restored soil they would be obsolete.

There is vastly more carbon in Europe's soil than in its forests. A 1.7% change in soil carbon content in the world's farmland would remove enough carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to get us back to pre-industrial levels. In soil terms, carbon means organic matter and organic matter means fertility. So it's an entirely virtuous cycle.

Our project is to refine the methods required to farm in this way, constantly building rather than destroying fertility and leaving our land better than we found it.

How?

Diversity

Nature, the world's finest farmer, always mixes plant and animal life. A mixed farm in which livestock, grass, crops and trees interact is the only basis of sustainable agriculture. From such diversity we create the resilience of sustainability of the forest system; a constant recycling of elements brought up from all layers of the soil and integrated into the surface by huge armies of beneficiary workers.

At the farm we create this diversity by restoring hedgerows and planting trees. In the fields we sow hugely diverse and deep rooting pastures. We grow our crops in associations, and under-sow these associations with a still more varieties of ground cover.

No till

The carbon and fertility thus locked away has to be carefully preserved. We do this in two ways. Innovative growing techniques in which crops are sown into rolled cover crops meaning the earth is never tilled and is permanently covered. There are only 2 passages in the field - sowing and harvesting. Last year our yields from this system surpassed those of the conventionally farmed control. Further refinements are on-going.

Secondly, we have converted the farm to modern horse power. After visiting the Amish and studying the economics of the question, it became clear that on a diversified farm of a reasonable size, animal traction is an economically better choice. It also avoids the soil compaction problems inherent in tractor farming, and entirely cuts out carbon emissions from the production process.

Varieties

For 10,000 years mankind selected crops for their taste and nutrition. Since the misnamed 'green revolution' we have hybridized our crops to tolerate huge doses of chemicals and in doing so, rendered them weak and nutritionally worthless. The restoration of local varieties suited to real farming and the production of real food is an essential part of our project.

Conclusion

There is ten times more energy going into a conventionally farmed field than comes out as food and yet we as taxpayers give huge subsidies to this kind of agriculture. The idea of removing all trees and hedges and cultivating every last inch with increasingly large machines remains the prevailing ideology. But in doing so we have killed the soil, and in this dead soil our food crops require an average of 6 pesticide and 3 herbicide applications to keep them alive. Health effects of exposure to these poisonous chemicals were recently estimated to cost £7500 per person annually in the EU. There's nothing cheap about the food that comes from this system. The environmental and health impacts are such that this food costs us a fortune, it's just that we've

deferred the payments for a while. This kind of agriculture will soon cost us the Earth. At our farm, after only 4 years (not even the beginning of the blink of an eye in terms of nature's timescales) we can see that, given a chance, nature comes roaring back. It's clear that an agriculture that provides health, nutrition and diversity is readily achievable. Our belief is that the only way to affect this change is to provide working alternatives.
"You never change things by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete." B. Fuller.